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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 SANAA 002440

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TAGS: [ASEC](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [YM](#) [COUNTER TERRORISM](#)

SUBJECT: ROYG BRIEFING ON DISRUPTION OF AL-QAIDA CELL IN SANAA

REF: A. (A) SANAA 2434

[1](#)B. (B) SANAA 2410

Classified By: Ambassador Edmund J. Hull for reasons 1.5 (C), (G).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: On 9/28 Interior Minister Alimi called in Ambassador, with ambassadors of Italy, France, UK and Germany, to brief on ROYG's recent disruption of a Sanaa-based al-Qaida cell targeting U.S., other Western, and Yemeni objectives. Alimi's briefing elaborated on preliminary information provided by President Saleh during GEN Abizaid's 9/20 visit (ref b). The group -- calling itself the "Unification Brigades" -- reportedly targeted Ambassador's motorcade on past two occasions, but was deterred by his security escort. The group had compiled a long list of potential targets, but only one -- an assault on the UK Embassy -- was in operational preparation. Alimi noted that explosives and weapons for that attack were to be procured in Marib and al-Jawf with money sent from Saudi Arabia, and had in fact not/not yet been sent to Sanaa. While the leader of the group ('Amr Abdul Rahman al-Sharif) is in custody with three confederates, Alimi stressed that at least one group member (Abdul Rahman Basoura) remained at large (probably in Saudi Arabia) and there could be others. Accordingly the ROYG had boosted security at all sites on the target list, and urged Western embassies to exercise caution. Alimi said he had briefed the Saudi Deputy Interior Minister, and would ask the Iranian ambassador for Tehran's cooperation in the ongoing investigation because Basoura was based in Iran. Embassy Sanaa's EAC discussed the information and issued a warden message 9/28 (ref a), and held a wardens meeting 9/30. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Yemen's Interior Minister, Dr. Rashad al-Alimi, on 9/28 convened a meeting of key Western embassies to brief on ROYG's recent disruption of an al-Qaida affiliated cell in Sanaa. Attendees at the briefing were the Ambassador (accompanied by DCM and RSO), British Ambassador, Italian Ambassador, French Charge, and German DCM. Alimi noted that the operation was carried out by Central Security Organization forces under his ministry. His read-out elaborated on initial information provided by President Saleh in his 9/20 meeting with CENTCOM Commander GEN Abizaid on 9/20 (ref b). Alimi said the investigation was ongoing, stressing that further information would be provided to the embassies as it became available "because all of us are targets now."

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A Long List of Targets  
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[1](#)3. (C) Alimi reviewed the group's lengthy target list, which included: the UK embassy; the Italian embassy; the French cultural center; DHL; Spectrum (a local language school that specializes in English but has no affiliation with the U.S. or UK embassies, but which, Alimi pointed out, is close to the home of PSO chief Gamish); the Hadda Compound (home to many foreign workers and diplomats, including more than a dozen U.S. Embassy families); the Red Cross; the Hertz car rental company; American restaurants (e.g. the Pizza Hut and Kentucky Fried Chicken franchises); Yemenia Airlines; PSO headquarters; the Presidential Palace; Parliament; the Radio/TV center; the Central Bank; The Interior Ministry's Immigration and Passports Office the Civil Records Office; The Yemeni International Bank; Spacetel (a mobile phone company); Coca Cola; the Procter and Gamble office in Taiz (closed more than a year ago, suggesting a gap in the terrorists' research); Defense Minister Aliwa; Interior Minister Alimi; PSO Chief Gamish; former PM Iryani; and current PM Bajammal.

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Plan to Target UK Embassy  
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[1](#)4. (C) Alimi cited three main modes of attack the group had envisioned: car bombs, ambush/assassination attacks, and standoff attacks with RPGs. This was theoretical, however, as the group had not yet acquired the necessary arms and explosives.

15. (C) Alimi stressed that only the UK embassy compound attack was in an operational planning stage. He showed surveillance notes and tactical sketches the group had made of the compound's entrances others, and promised to provide the UK Ambassador with a copy of a surveillance videotape they had made. The group was awaiting weapons and explosives for the attack which were to be acquired in Marib and al-Jawf with money sent from Saudi Arabia, and then the arms were to be sent on to Sanaa. Alimi expressed high confidence that the weapons/explosives had not/not reached Sanaa.

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Targeting the U.S. Ambassador  
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16. (C) The Minister noted that the group had "more than once" targeted the U.S. Ambassador's motorcade for assassination, but were deterred by his security escort.

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Members of the "Cells of Faith and Unity"  
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17. (C) Alimi stated that four members of the group were in custody, and provided general information on several group members:

-- The head of the group, now in custody, is a Yemeni named 'Amr Abdul Rahman al-Sharif, aka Abu Sagr al-Mekki, who had been a long-term resident of Saudi Arabia. Alimi described him as the 4th ranking al-Qaida leader in the Arabian Peninsula, noting that he had succeeded Abu Ali al-Harithy as head of al-Qaida operations in Yemen. A peninsula-wide al-Qaida reorganization in the aftermath of Harithy's death and the arrest of Fawaz al-Rabi'e moved Sharif up in the hierarchy and gave rise to a new nomenclature. Sharif's group called itself the "Cells of Faith and Unity," and claimed to be part of a larger grouping called the "Unification Brigades."

-- Sharif's deputy, Abdul Rahman Basoura, also Yemeni, remains at large. He was sent to Saudi Arabia to get money for the group, so Alimi hopes he will be apprehended in the KSA or in Yemen when/if he returns. Basoura is based in Iran, and on that basis Alimi said he planned to call in the Iranian Ambassador and request Tehran's assistance in the investigation.

-- Another group member still at large, Ghalib al-Zaidi, was perhaps charged with the task of bringing the arms and explosives, once obtained, from Marib to Sanaa.

18. (C) Alimi revealed that discovery of the cell resulted from investigation of an 18 year-old girl who, having run away from her family, was living with members of the group. A police inquiry into this illicit connection led to discovery of documents establishing the group's terrorist aims. Alimi said police did not consider the girl a "member" of the group as such, but surmised that she would have been used in some way in a future operation. He observed that the immoral use of a young girl reflected the falsity of the group's pretense of religious rectitude.

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Yemeni-Saudi Cooperation  
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19. (C) Yemeni authorities recovered a wealth of information in the round-up of cell members, including documents, computer disks and telephone numbers. Alimi stated that the telephone numbers were all being monitored, and might lead to more arrests. The information also included telephone numbers in Saudi Arabia, and the Saudis -- specifically Deputy Interior Minister Mohamed bin Naif, who was in Sanaa 9/28 -- had been given all details. He repeatedly underscored both the closeness of ongoing cooperation with the Saudis and the fact that "all the group's money and 3/4 of its leadership" was to be found in the Kingdom.

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Follow-up Inside Yemen  
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110. (C) Alimi added that further information, including written documentation, would be provided to the U.S. Embassy by the PSO later the same day. While expressing confidence that the cell's operational plans had been disrupted, Alimi urged that the embassies be alert to possible action by elements as yet unknown. One aim of the continuing investigation in Yemen, he told the Ambassador, was to discover any location the group had used in Yemen for training.

112. (C) In response to a question from AMB Hull, Alimi said the ROYG would maintain stepped up security at potential target sites but would not make a full public statement until the investigation was further along. He noted with evident

satisfaction that the investigation had proceeded productively for a full week without any loss of secrecy.

¶13. (C) The German DCM asked if a ROYG order for German archaeologists to leave Sirwah and return to Marib was related to this investigation. Alimi replied in the affirmative, stating that the German team should either work in the Marib area -- which would pose no security problem -- or return to Sanaa.

¶14. (C) The German DCM praised the work of the MOI in disrupting this cell, a sentiment echoed by Ambassador Hull.

¶15. (S/NF) Comment: Disruption of this Sanaa-based cell is a major success for the Interior Ministry, which seems to have moved quickly to round up cell members and conduct productive interrogations. The Political Security Organization has provided ORCA with further documentation on the disrupted cell that will be reported via intel channels. Post will probe ROYG for maximum detail on the two reported instances of targeting Ambassador's motorcade and reassess security arrangements accordingly. Ambassador's security escort currently includes both Embassy bodyguards and Yemeni police elements. Post issued a 9/28 warden message (which was previewed to Alimi) and held a wardens meeting on 9/30.

Hull

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